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"MY MOTHERLAND" SERIES XE. NO. 18

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SRI RAMAKRISHNA PARAMAHAMSA

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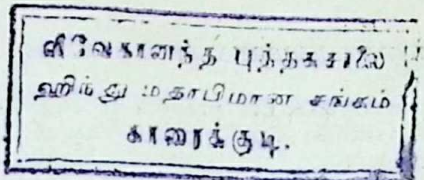

SRI RAMAKRISHNA PARAMAHAMSA

Politically fallen, socially degraded, financially ruined, India is yet a giant spiritually. In a less spiritual nation all hope of recovery would have long been lost. No so here. As long as India could produce a Paramahamsa, a Gandhi, or a Ramana Maharshi, no one need despair of its success in regaining its original place.

In these days of political ferment, people are apt to forget that saints and sages can contribute more than politicians and publicists to the regaining of our status. If Gandhiji were not a saint, he would not command so much influence. We must never forget that it is peculiar to India to be led by saintly personages. Asoka was a mighty king, but did he not conduct himself as the representative of Buddha ? Shivaji ruled only on behalf of Ramdas.

To all appearances, Ramakrishna Paramahamsa was a mere ascetic, in search of something incomprehensible. But the dynamic youth of Bengal could not resist his influence. And not a little of its forwardness Bengal owes to Swami Vivekananda, the creation of Paramahamsa.

As such, the life of that sage has its own fascination even for this generation.

Ramakrishna was the child of faith and beatitude. The circumstances that attended his birth were of supernatural character. He was born at a time when his parents were apparently past the age of child-bearing. It is even thought that like Christ he was the product of immaculate conception.

It happened thus. His father, Khudiram, had been to Gaya on a pilgrimage. He was there for a month offering prayers and observing customary ceremonials in the various shrines in the hills and plains around. When he came to the

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central temple and offered his prayers he felt that peace that 'passeth all understanding.' The same day at night he had a vision. He heard a voice calling him by his name. When he was wondering what it meant, he beheld a luminous person seated on a throne. Khudiram prostrated himself. The Lord addressing him said, "I am well pleased at your devotion. I am born again and again to chastise the wicked and protect the virtuous. This time I shall be born in your cottage and accept you as my father."

Bewildered, Khudiram said: "No, my Lord, I am not fit for this favour. Thou hast already shown me more than I deserve. I am too poor to serve Thee properly." The Lord consoled him and disappeared.

His Wife's Experiences

Elated with what he saw and heard in the dream, Khudiram returned to his village. The first thing that drew his attention was the change that seemed to have come over his wife, Chandra. He observed that instead of looking up to the family Deity with awe and reverence as she used to do before, she was regarding and loving Him as her own child. A strange sweetness also surrounded her daily duties about the worship room.

Khudiram soon came to know what the change in his wife was due to. She told him: "I had a dream one night that you had come; and that before I could know if you had entered the room, I found you locking me within your loving embrace and I felt so happy. But on looking up to your face the next moment, I found that you had been so transformed as I could hardly recognise you. Your appearance seemed to be more like the effulgent forms of those whom we worship than of any man I had ever seen. A strange feeling then possessed me as if I was in another's embrace. I shrieked and struggled to free myself and in the attempt, I awoke with a sudden start to find me alone in my bed, shivering all over with fright and dismay. Then again a few days later, as I was standing one day with my poor companion Dhani, the daughter of our blacksmith neighbour, before the temple of Shiva in front of our cottage, I was so startled to find the image alive. It began to emanate ethereal waves of

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exquisite, supernatural light, at first slowly and then with a rapidity, which can hardly be imagined. The waves filled the room; then gaining in volume and strength suddenly darted towards me like the mighty bore in the river and deluged me completely as I was struggling to get away—and I fell down on the ground losing consciousness. I awoke to find myself in the arms of my companion who, however, was perfectly unaware of what had taken place. But instead of feeling weak for it, I felt myself stronger than ever and borne up with a strange elation of spirit. I have the impression since then as if a part of the self-same wave is still within me."

This report only confirmed Khudiram's belief that a child was soon arriving at his home, and he told Chandra his experiences at Gaya. They kept their experiences secret to themselves. It soon transpired that she was in the way to motherhood. She was at that time forty-five years old, and Khudiram was past sixty.

Birth of the Child

It was the 17th February, 1836, the beginning of spring-tide in Bengal, when all nature was revelling in the fresh waves of life and energy. It was long past midnight. The east was red with the breaking of the day. At that moment Chandra gave birth to the child awaited with so much love and reverence. After giving the necessary assistance to the mother, Dhani turned her attention to the babe, which, to her surprise, was not where she had placed it. It had slipped into the adjacent oven, and was lying there half covered with ashes, without uttering a cry. She picked it up and was astonished to find that it was as large as a child six months old.

The whole village of Kamarpukur welcomed the advent of this child, born of the holy Brahmin parents, Chandra and Khudiram. The child grew singularly beautiful, and showed signs of extraordinary precocity. He had been named Gadadhar after the Lord in the Gaya temple. There was not a household in that sweet village in which Gadadhar was not loved. Many remarked to Khudiram, "Brother, your Gadadhar is not an ordinary child; the

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divinity within shines so clear through his little body and mind that he makes us feel as if we are before the Divine child Gopala, we worship." Gadadhar was at this time only five years old.

Though averse to attend the schools regularly, Gadadhar soon learnt to read Ramayana and Mahabarata. The folk-lore of the villages around had a great attraction for him. He shed tears while reading them and felt a deep yearning for a sight of the Divine Mother.

While absorbed in such studies and vivid imaginings, he did not neglect play and sport. He excelled his companions in climbing trees, in swimming, running, etc. He was a master in devising new games. He played all sorts of boyish pranks such as robbing orchards, or teasing and fighting people who became annoyed at his pranks on account of their noisy mirth.

In his seventh year he lost his father. This made him think as deeply as he could at that time on the problem of life and death. His fondness for frequenting solitary places increased and he passed many an hour in the lonely fields and on the cremation ground by the side of the little rivulet close to his place or in the adjacent mango grove.

His Love For Monks

Even at that early age, the life of those who had renounced the world had a great charm for him. He began to frequent the Dharmasala (where pilgrims and wayfarers used to stay for rest) and cultivate the acquaintance of the itinerant monks. It so happened that a band of such monks stopped here for some weeks at that time, and Gadadhar became attached to them. They told him the stories of their travels and taught him the ways of meditation. It is said that his fondness for them increased so much that he dressed himself one day like them and came to his mother to show how well he looked in that garb. The mother, though pleased at first with this stange fancy of her boy, grew anxious afterwards on his account. For the village knew that the wandering monks often swelled their ranks by enticing away youths and some times even boys of his age. Her heart knew no rest until the Sadhus left the village.

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When he was about eight years old, he happened to accompany a party of women going to the sanctuary of the Goddess Visalakshi in the village of Amur, a mile to the north of Kamarpukur. On the way he entertained them with songs of the Divine Mother and reciting stories from Puranas at their request. Then something unexpected happened. Gadadhar suddenly lost all outward consciousness and fell into a deep trance. The ladies, who had never experienced such a thing before, took his case for sun-stroke. Some ran to the neighbouring tank for water and others began to fan him after placing him under the cool shade of a tree. But they were all surprised to see the boy's face radiant with a heavenly smile, and the calm dignity and self-possession of it inspired awe in their simple hearts. They sat round the boy and began to chant the name of the Mother with deep devotion. And before long he came to his ordinary senses again. He told the delighted ladies that he hardly knew anything, but it seemed to him as if his mind suddenly getting concentrated on the thought of the Divine Mother, while he was chanting Her name, lost all its bearings, and its movements became finally confined to an indescribable vision of beauty and delight. The party went to the sanctuary and after worship returned home.

When Acting As Shiva

Another occasion on which Gadadhar came to experience the Divine communion and God-vision was the holy day of *Shivaratri*. It happened in this way. A dramatic performance has been arranged for the night vigil. But at the eleventh hour, the person who was to take the part of Shiva fell ill suddenly and there was every chance of the performance being given up altogether. This news disheartened the expectant villagers. But the friends of Gadadhar suggested a way out by asking him to take the part. The suggestion looked good, and the friends ran to his house and prevailed upon him to come to the stage, though he was unwilling to break the meditation he was engaged in. He was dressed as Shiva, and his emotion was so strongly stirred that when his turn came to appear he could only move out with great difficulty. And on the stage, when another actor began to chant prayer, he lost all consciousness and stood like a statue. Tears flowed

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down in plenty. At first it was taken by the audience as part of his acting, and he received a shower of applause for its naturalness. But in a few minutes they grew impatient and one or two of the elders came near, only to find him perfectly unconscious. In spite of their strenuous efforts his trance could not be broken. The play was stopped, and he was carried to his house in that state.

After this incident this kind of trance became natural to him. His people became alarmed, thinking that it might be due to nervous affection. They treated him for it; but soon found out that the trances did not affect his health.

In the meantime some calamities befell his home. His brother Rama Kumar, the support of the family lost his wife. She left behind a child a few days old. The income of the family was frightfully dwindling. The task of looking after the child fell on the aged Chandra. These thoughts worried Rama Kumar very much, and he was seeking a way out. Somebody suggested that he might go to Calcutta to seek his fortune. He fell in with the idea and went to Calcutta and opened a school.

Wanted To Be a Woman

Gadadhar's aversion to school studies resulted in his staying at home. The ladies of the neighbourhood who came to his mother, would often seize the opportunity of making Gadadhar sing them devotional songs or read out some religious book or recite hymns. Seeing the eagerness of the ladies he often acted out some of the dramas, enacting the different parts in different impersonations and speaking in different tones befitting the respective characters. Some times he would amuse them by acting the burlesque of a farce or by imitating the ludicrous manners of some known persons of the village. Thus he won the affections of the ladies and exerted a peculiar influence over them.

It is a popular belief all over the world that a misogynist is half a saint. And real saints do not see any evil in women. The Paramahamsa had even wished that he had been born a woman. Some times he considered his male body as a great obstacle in his way to realise God. In pursuance of this proclivity of his mind, he would, at times, actually dress

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himself as a woman and play the parts of women characters of drama.

By this time he grew to be nearly 17. And his brother Rama Kumar came to the village and took him away with him to Calcutta. Here he found himself as a fish out of water. When his brother admonished him for his apathy towards education and his general indifference, he said "Brother, what shall I do with a mere bread-winning education ? I would rather acquire that wisdom which will illumine my heart and getting which one is satisfied for ever."

Rama Kumar could scarcely believe his ears and was puzzled. In vain did he try to convince the boy of the utility of learning, and painting picturesquely its bright aspects and the easy and happy life of the educated man of the town. These arguments made no appeal to Gadadhar.

After two years Gadadhar got a chance to go the way he pleased.

At The Kali temple

In Calcutta there lived a rich widow named Rani Rasmani. The Goddess Kali was her special object of devotion, her image even appearing on the seal of the estate. For many years she had the desire to make a pilgrimage to Benares. When at last she made the necessary arrangements to start, she had a dream, in which the Goddess appeared to her, ordered her to abandon the journey, told her to build and dedicate a temple to her on the banks of the Ganges. If this were done she promised to manifest herself in the image set up.

Accordingly the Rani abandoned the journey and set about carrying out the divine injunction. In the year 1847 tweny acres of land at Dakshineswar on the Ganges were purchased and a building which took some eight years to complete was begun.

The day fixed for the installation of the statue of the Goddess was May 31st 1855, a sacred day, known as Snanayatra. Everything was ready, and the Rani's heart was filled with joy. But at the last moment, an unforeseen obstacle arose which seemed to destroy her plans. The Rani was a Sudra by caste, and therefore no orthodox Brahmin

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would officiate as her priest or partake of sacramental food in her temple. The Rani was in a dilemma. Pandits were consulted, and their replies were not favourable. The Rani was in utter despair. Then a suggestion came from Ram Kumar, Gadadhar's brother, that if the Rani made a gift of the Kali temple to a Brahmin, her desire would be fulfilled. Again there was the difficuty to get a Brahmin sufficiently learned in the scriptures, to perform the puja ceremony in accordance with their injunction. It was Rama Kumar who again, under great pressure, came to the rescue. The ceremony was performed with great pomp. It is said that the Rani spent altogether nine lakhs of rupees for the construc ion of the temple and its opening ceremony.

With his brother, Ramakrishna moved to the Kali temple. His presence was noticed by Mathura Mohan, a son-in-law of the Rani. A desire arose in Mathura's mind to connect Ramakrishna in some way with the work of the temple, but it was not without difficulty that his service could be secured. The work he undertook was the dressing and decorating of the Divine Mother.

How He Startled Pundits

One day during a festival, the priest Kshetra Nath dropped the image of Krishna, having slipped on the marble floor, and one leg of the image was broken. There was great commotion. The priest was dismissed. Pundits concluded that a new image must be installed, and the broken one be dropped in the Ganges. The Rani was not willing to throw away the image of her former worship, and at the suggestion of Mathur, she sought the advice of Ramakrishna. After hearing the whole story Ramakrishna exclaimed in an exalted mood : "Their solution is ridiculous. If a son-in-law of the Rani fractured his leg, would she discard him and put another in his stead? Would not she rather arrange for his treatment? Why not do the same thing here ? Let the image be repaired and worshipped as before." This startled the Pandits very much, but they had to yield, and great was the Rani's jubilance. Ramakrishna himself had to take the post of the priest.

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At this time, his yearning to see the Divine Mother so overwhelmed him that not a moment passed without praying and meditating. He describes his first vision thus :

" I was then suffering from excruciating pain because I had not been blessed with a vision of the Mother. I felt as if my heart were being squeezed like a wet towel. I was overpowered by a great restlesssness and a fear that it might not be my lot to realise Her in this life. I could not bear the separation any longer ; life did not seem worth living. Suddenly my eyes fell on the sword that was kept in the Mother's temple. Determined to put an end to my life, I jumped up like a mad man and seized it, when suddenly the Blessed Mother revealed Herself to me, and I fell unconscious on the floor. What happened after that externally I do not know ; but within me there was a steady flow of undiluted bliss algether anew, and I felt the presence of the Divine Mother.

" The buildings with their different parts, the temple and all, vanished from my sight, leaving no trace whatsoever, and in their stead was a limitless, infinite, effulgent ocean of consciousness or spirit. As far as the eye could reach, its shining billows were madly rushing towards me from all sides with a terrific noise, to swallow me up! In the twinkling of an eye they were on me and engulfed me completely. I was panting for breath. I was caught in the billows and fell down senseless."

From that day onwards Sri Ramakrishna had extraordinary visions, some of them while in the trance state, others in normal consciousness. He was often seen conversing with the stone image of Kali as if it were fully conscious. As his realisation deepened, the vision of the Mother became continuous. Formerly at the time of meditation it was with difficulty that he gained a glimpse of Her beautiful hand, feet or face ; now he saw her entire form as She spoke to him and directed him in his day's work. Formerly he regarded the stone image of Kali as possessed of consciousness ; now the image disappeared and in its place there stood the Living Mother Herself smiling and blessing him.

The Marriage

In the meanwhile he paid a visit to his native village. His mother and brother thought of putting him in the way of

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the world by marrying him. In vain did they search for a bride. Coming to know their difficulty he told them in a semi-conscious mood, "It is useless to try here and there. Go to Jayarambati, and there you will find the bride providentially reserved for me in the house of Rama Chandra Mahopadhyaya." They sent a man to that village, who returned with the report that it was true that Ram Chandra had a girl, but only five years old. The anxious mother agreed to accept the girl, and Sri Ramakrishna was married.

Coming back to Dakshineswar he plunged further and further into meditation. Later on he said referring to these times, "For want of proper care, my hair was matted. Birds would perch on my head. Often snakes would crawl over my motionless body—and neither I nor the snake knew it. Oh, what visions flitted past my eyes, day and night!

"For six years these eyes remained wide open; not a wink of sleep visited them. I could not close the eye-lids, however much I might try to do so. I had no idea of time nor of the body. Standing before a mirror, I would put my finger into my eyes to see if the eye lids would close, but they would not. Horrified, I would often burst into tears and pray, 'Mother, is this the result of praying and wholly surrendering myself unto Thee? Ah! Thou has visited me with a fell disease!' But the next moment I would say, 'Let it be as Thou wishest. Let this body go to pieces but leave me not.' The blissful Mother would appear before me and console me with her gracious words."

Not content with his own way of realising God, he engaged himself in other Sadhanas too. With the help of a Sanyasini, he went through all the exercises mentioned in the sixty-four principal Tantra books. Most of these were extremely difficult Sadhanas—some of them so dangerous that they sometimes cause the devotee to lose his footing and sink into moral degradation. But the infinite grace of the Mother carried him through them unscathed.

At this time he lost the sense of distinction between holy and unholy. But his most remarkable experience during this period was that of the upward march of the Khundalini Shakti.

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He also saw the Ultimate Cause of the Universe as a large luminous triangle which was giving birth every moment to an infinite number of universes.

He had free use of the eight Siddhis or supernatural powers which make man a God—almost omnipotent. But the Mother showed him in a vision that for a real devotee these powers are worthless. From that time he always thought of them with repugnance and used to warn his devotees against them.

Further Experiences

All these years his complexion was so beautiful that he attracted attention everywhere. He used to wear a gold amulet on his arm, and it could hardly be distinguished from the golden colour of the body. He himself said, "People used to stare at the loveliness of my form. The chest and face were flushed, and the whole body seemed to be luminous. To escape public notice I had to wrap a stout sheet round my body. I prayed to Mother: 'Take back thy outward beauty Mother, and give me instead thy inner beauty and purity of the spirit.' I used to stroke the body gently and repeat, 'Dive inward.' After a long time the exterior became dull as it is now."

Not very long after such experiences there came to Dakshineswar, Totapuri, a wonderful man—wonderful both for his great Advaita realisation and for practical demonstrations of it in his life. He was one of those itinerant monks who, realising Brahman as the only Reality, spend their life under the canopy of heaven.

Totapuri wished to initiate Ramakrishna into Nirvikalpa Samadhi. Ramakrishna agreed, but at first he met with difficulties. "Again and again I tried to concentrate my mind upon the Advaita teachings, but every time the Mother's form stood in my way. In despair I said, 'It is hopeless. I cannot raise my mind to the unconditioned state and come face to face with Atman.' He (Totapuri) grew excited and sharply said, 'What? You can't do it! But you have to.' He cast his eyes around, and finding a piece of glass he took it up and pressing the point between my eyebrows said, 'concentrate the mind on this point.' Then with a stern determination I again sat to meditate, and as soon as the gracious form of the

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Divine Mother appeared as before, I used my discrimination as a sword and with it severed it into two. There remained no more obstruction to my mind, which at once soared beyond the relative plane, and I lost myself in Samadhi."

For three days he continued in this state. Totapuri was surprised that Ramakrishna could attain that state in a single day, which took him more than forty years.

His Great Pupil

Great Pundits and religious leaders, such as Vidya Sagar and Keshub Chandra Sen came into contact with Sri Ramakrishna and benefitted greatly. Besides these mature men, a number of young men became interested in him, and one of them was Narendra Nath, who became known later as Swami Vivekananda.

The Master knew that Narendra's was the path of Jnana, that in the end he would become enamoured of the philosophy of the Advaita and be led to the highest realisation. For this reason he made it a point to talk on Advaita philosophy before him. One day he tried to bring home to the latter the identity of the individual soul with Brahman, but could not convince him. Narendra left the room and discussed the same topic with a friend outside. He said, "How can that be? this jug is God, the cup is God, whatever we see is God, and we too are God. Nothing can be more preposterous!" And both the friends laughed. Sri Ramakrishna was in his room in a state of semi-consciousness. Hearing Narendra's laughter he came out, with his cloth under his arm like a child. "Hallo! What are you talking about?" he said smiling, touched Narendra and plunged into Samadhi. Describing the effect of the touch on him, Narendra said, "That magic touch of the Master immediately brought a change over my mind. I was stupefied to find that really there was nothing in the universe but God! I saw it quite clearly but kept silent to see if the idea would last. But that influence did not abate in the course of the day. I returned home, but there too, everything I saw appeared to be Brahman. I sat down to take my meal, but found that everything, the food, the plate, the person who served, and even myself—was nothing but that. I ate a morsel or two and sat still. I was startled by my mother's words, 'Why do you sit still? Finish your meal,'—and began

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to eat again. But all the while, whether eating or lying down or going to college, I had the same experience and felt myself always in a sort of comatose state. While walking in the streets, I noticed cabs playing, but I did not feel inclined to move out of the way, for I felt that the cabs and myself were of one stuff. When I became normal again, I realised that I must have had a glimpse of the Advaita state. Then it struck me that the words of the scriptures were not false. Thenceforth I could not deny the conclusions of the Advaita philosophy."

When Narendra became a staunch disciple of Ramakrishna, a number of other young men, too, gathered around him. They were all very devoted to him. At this time the Master contracted some throat trouble, and he suffered very much. The disciples took him to a Calcutta residence for medical treatment and eminent doctors attended on him, but to no good. Thinking a change to some garden-house outside the city would do him good, the disciples hired one at Cossipore. It was on the 11th of December, 1885, the Master was removed to the new premises. He liked the place for its scenery, pure air and solitude.

With the Cossipore garden, we enter upon the last chapter of Sri Ramakrishna's life.

Here he gave the greatest manifestation of his powers and the devotees saw the fulfilment of his prophecies regarding his own end,—"I shall make the whole thing public before I go", "when people in large numbers will know and whisper about this body, then the Mother will take it back", "Devotees will be sifted into inner and outer circles towards the end", and so on. His prediction as to the renunciation of Narendra Nath and other young disciples also came true.

Day after day the condition of the disease got worse. His disciples told him that if he wanted he could cure himself. The Master only said that the will of the Divine Mother would be done.

A few days before he passed away, he called Narendra Nath to his side. There was nobody else in the room. He made Narendra sit before him and gazing at him fell into Samadhi. Narendra felt a subtle force like an electric shock

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penetrating his body. Gradually, he too lost outward consciousness. He did not remember how long he sat there. When he came to normal consciousness, he found Sri Ramakrishna weeping. On being asked why he wept, the Master said, "To-day I have given you my all and have become a Fakir! Through this power, you will do immense good to the world, and then only shall you go back." It was in this way that Sri Ramakrishna passed on his powers to Narendra; henceforth they both became one soul.

The last day arrived. Suddenly, a thrill passed through the Master's body making his hair stand on end. The eyes became fixed on the tip of the nose. The face was lit up with a smile. The Master entered into Mahasamadhi, never more to return to the mortal plane.

The teachings of Ramakrishna are of a universal nature. It is interesting to know, that by practising the Christian and Islamic doctrines he realised both Christ and Allah. He proclaimed that all religions were one at the bottom, and the differences were only superficial. The same was the view of Swami Vivekananda, and that is why he said that the ideal for India must be "an Islamic body with a Vedantic heart."

(SECOND EDITION)

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